

**Washington, D.C.** - If the House of Representatives were a person, it would be blushing these days. Unfortunately, the House is beyond embarrassment.

Its once (and maybe future) majority leader, Tom DeLay, is under indictment on money-laundering charges in Texas. One of its more colorful members, Randy "Duke" Cunningham of California, resigned last week after pleading guilty to shaking down lobbyists and contractors for \$2.4 million in cash and gifts.

DeLay's former press secretary, lobbyist Michael Scanlon, has copped a plea and is busy explaining to federal prosecutors how he funneled money to perhaps half a dozen other compliant members of the House. Scanlon's former partner, lobbyist Jack Abramoff, is at the center of separate investigations that could implicate still other legislators of both parties.

And in the midst of all these shenanigans, the House staged a mock debate about the legitimate issue of American troops in Iraq that was as uncouth as it was unproductive.

Alumni of the House -- men and women of both parties -- will tell you that they are appalled or nauseated by what has happened there. Last week, in a downtown restaurant, I ran into a former member of the GOP leadership who said, "I'm so thankful I got out when I did."

The place needs a good scrubbing, and that is what it would get if the leadership were somehow to embrace a set of rules changes put forward this week by several longtime members. But because the authors are Democrats -- and in some cases liberal as well -- the receptivity of the Republicans managing the House is not likely to be great.

The four members involved -- David Obey of Wisconsin, Barney Frank of Massachusetts, David Price of North Carolina and Tom Allen of Maine -- held a news conference on Monday at the Center for American Progress to introduce their 14-point plan. It is strong medicine -- a stiff enough dose of salts that even a watered-down version would mark a major change in the ethical environment of Capitol Hill.

On the lobbying front, for example, it would bar any reimbursed travel by a member of the House or its staff unless that person could certify in writing that no lobbyists were invited on the trip, no lobbyists attended the meetings, and whoever sponsored the gathering does not lobby or pay for lobbying.

It would also require former members who exercise their prerogative of visiting the floor of the House while it is in session to guarantee that the House is not debating a subject in which they have a financial interest and that the alumni will not advocate for or against any matter during the visit.

It cracks down on some of the favorite devices that Republicans have used to stifle genuine debate and deliberation in the House. To end the practice of lengthy roll calls -- some as long as three hours -- during which Republican arms are twisted to produce party-line victories, the rule would limit voting on any bill or amendment to 20 minutes, unless the leaders of both parties agreed to extend the time.

It would halt the spread of "earmarks," the spending targeted toward individual projects in members' districts, which are used to punish dissenters or reward reluctant supporters, thereby enforcing party discipline on bigger bills. And it would strike a further blow for budgetary sanity by requiring that reconciliation bills -- the end-of-the-line spending measures -- must be tailored to reduce the budget deficit, not increase it, except by a two-thirds vote of the House.

Finally, it would put teeth into two rules now often ignored by the majority party: It would require that printed copies of all bills be available at least 24 hours before they are called up for a vote, and it would insist that conference committees of the House and Senate actually meet and vote in open session, rather than having brief pro forma gatherings and then turning everything over to staff members or leadership aides to be negotiated in secret.

As I said, this is strong medicine. At the briefing, Tom Mann of the Brookings Institution, a scholar of Congress, asked the right question when he wondered whether the Democrats would actually adhere to such requirements if they became the House majority in a future election. Price said the requirements would be endorsed by the Democratic caucus and become part of the permanent rules. Frank added that the press would not allow the Democrats to backslide.

The Democrats' record during their 40-year reign in the House gives reason for skepticism. But something must be done to cleanse the House -- and this points the way.

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